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(54) **DIGITAL CLAY APPARATUS AND METHOD**

(75) Inventors: **Mark Allen**, Atlanta, GA (US); **Wayne J. Book**, Atlanta, GA (US); **Imme Ebert-Uphoff**, Roswell, GA (US); **Ari Glezer**, Atlanta, GA (US); **David W. Rosen**, Marietta, GA (US); **Jaroslav R. Rossignac**, Atlanta, GA (US)

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(73) Assignee: **Georgia Tech Research Corporation**, Atlanta, GA (US)

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This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

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(51) **Int. Cl.**
G06F 15/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **702/45**; 264/401

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 702/11, 702/45, 155, 159; 356/375; 264/401
See application file for complete search history.

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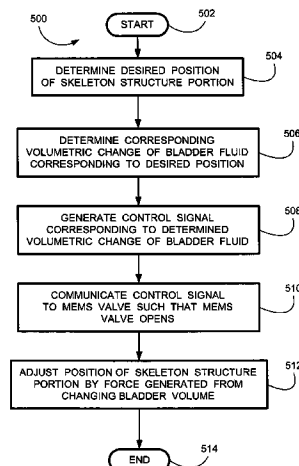
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system and method for controlling the surface and/or volume of a digital clay device is provided. One embodiment, among others, is a method comprising the following steps: determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device, determining a volumetric change of fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion, opening a valve so that the fluid flows through the valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid, and adjusting a position of the skeleton structure portion corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

45 Claims, 11 Drawing Sheets



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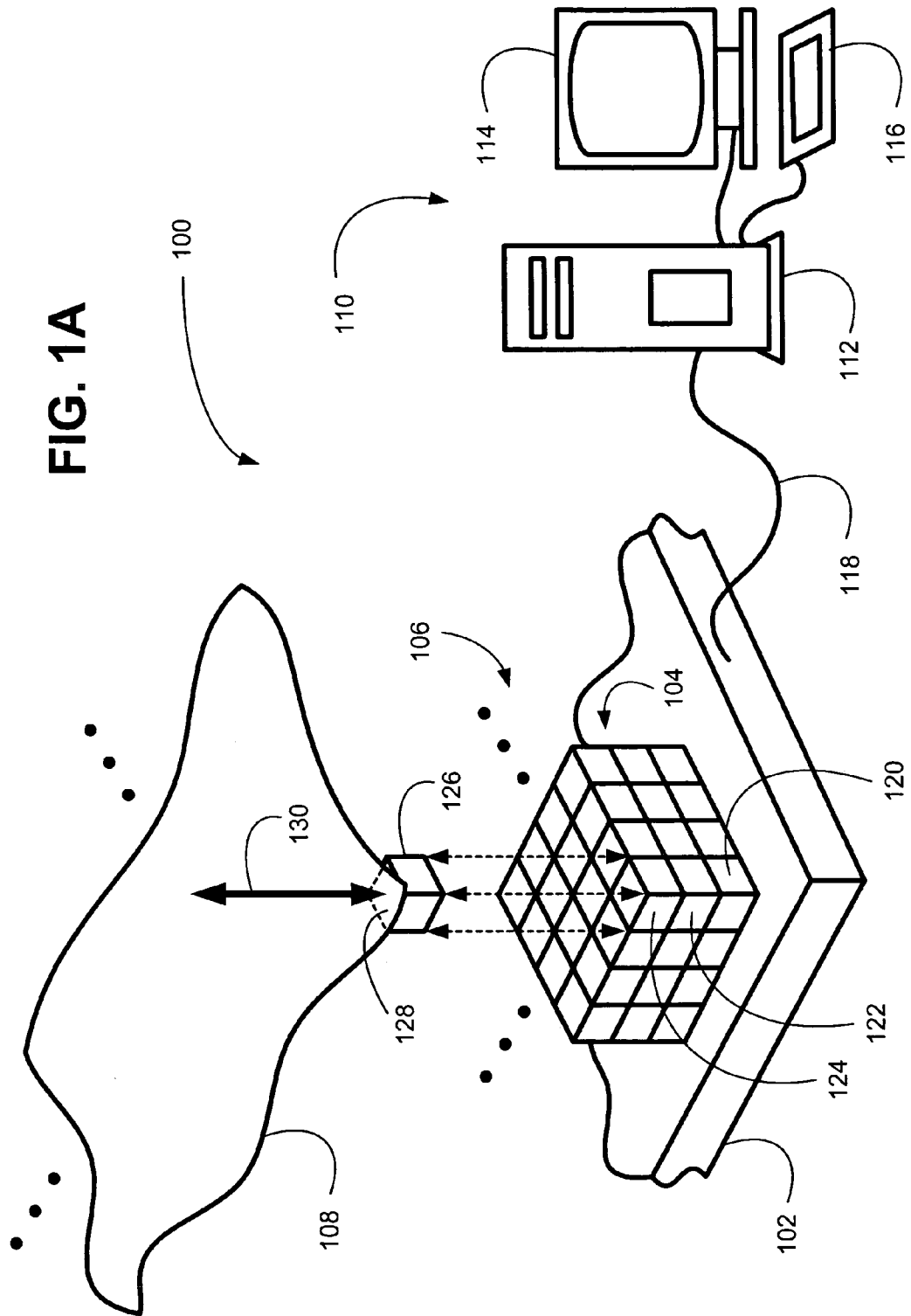
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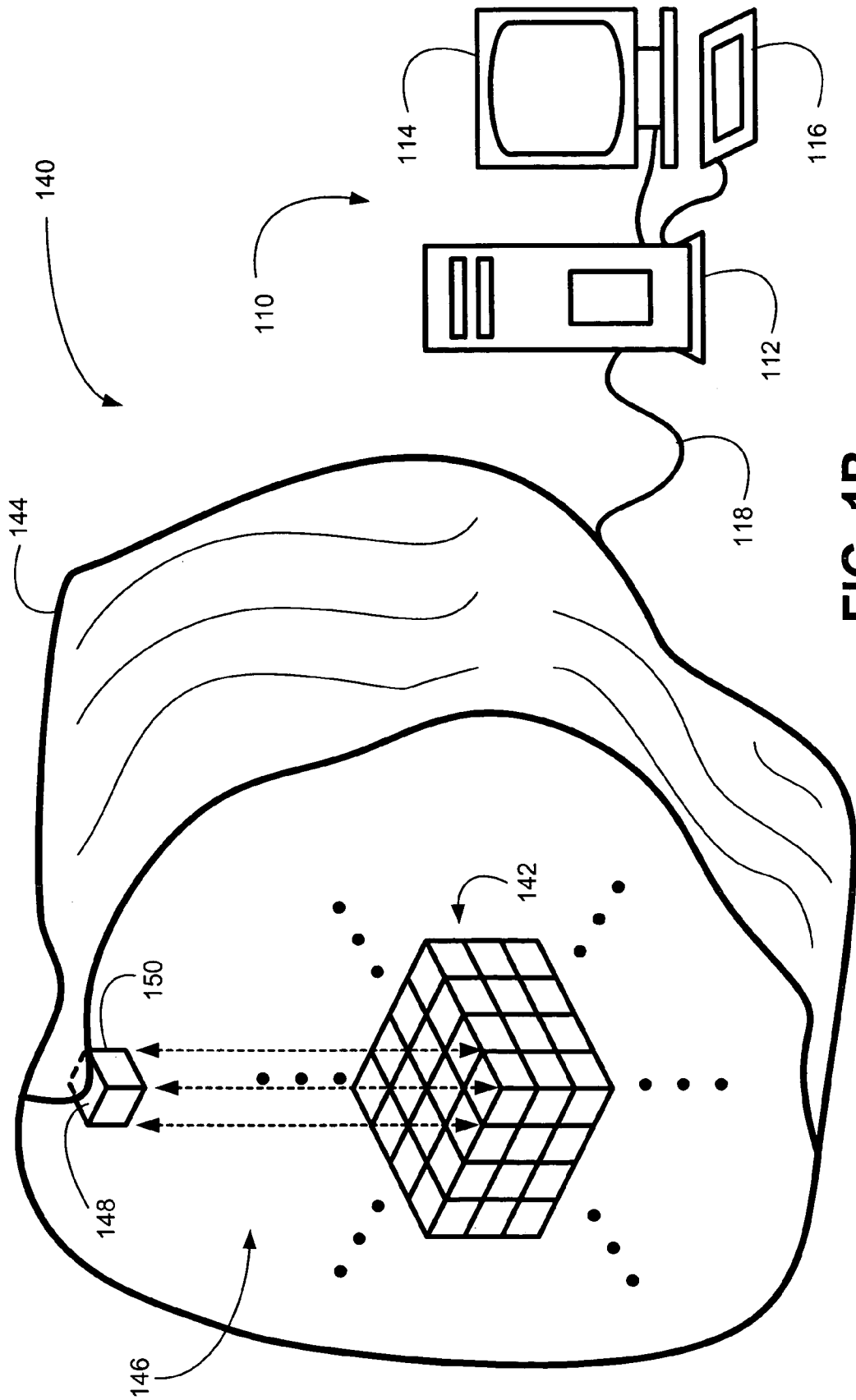


FIG. 1B

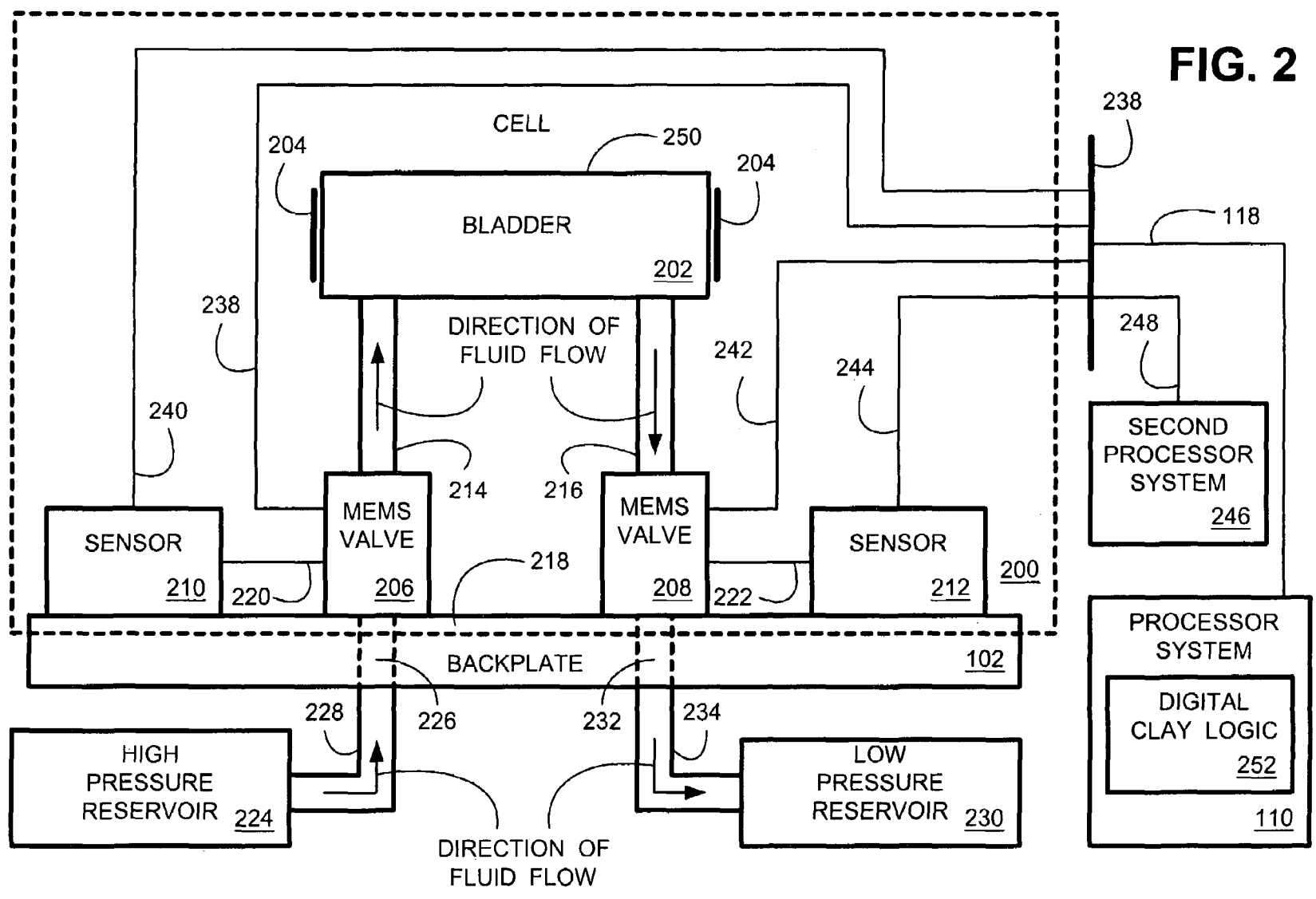
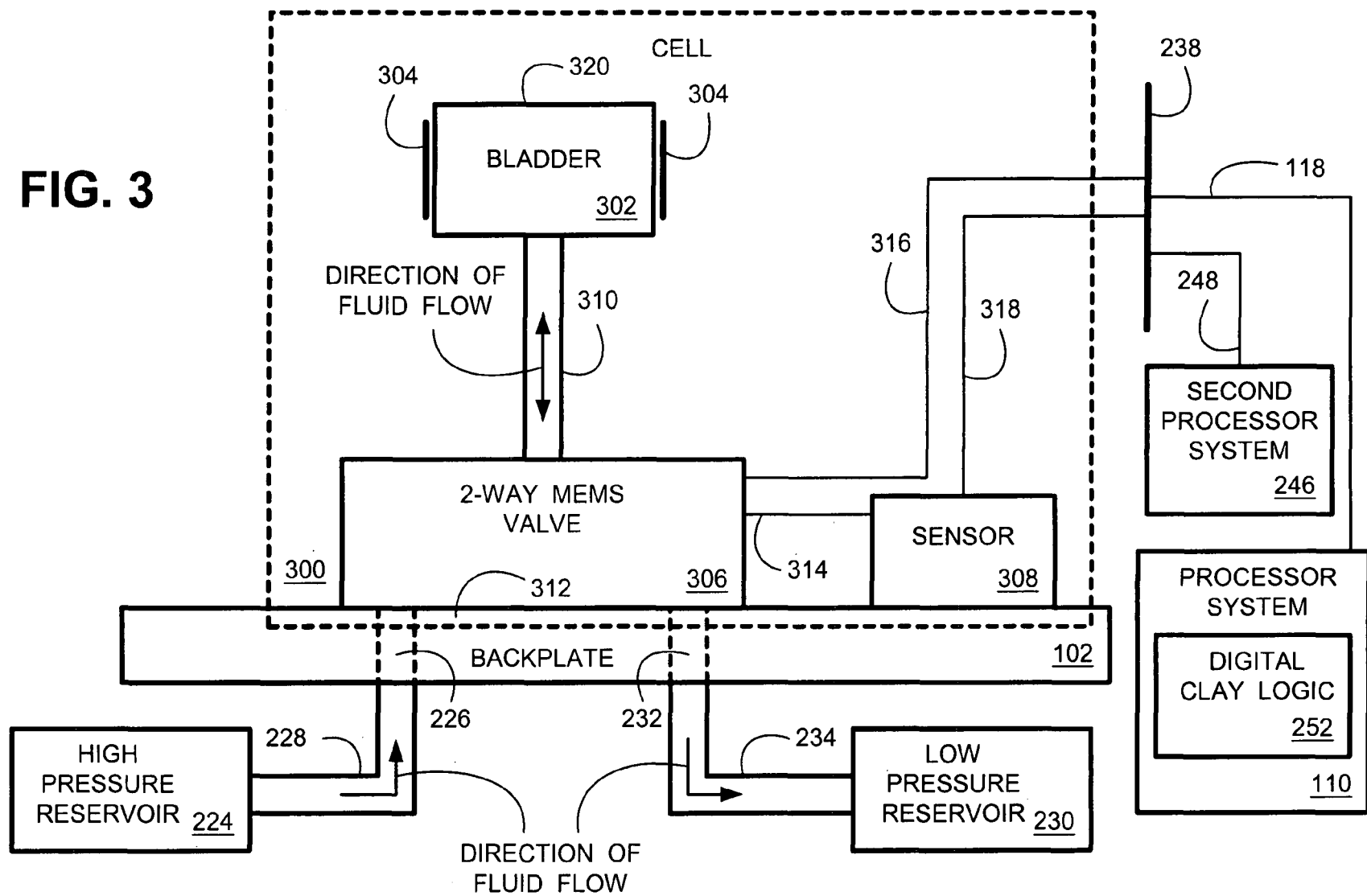


FIG. 3



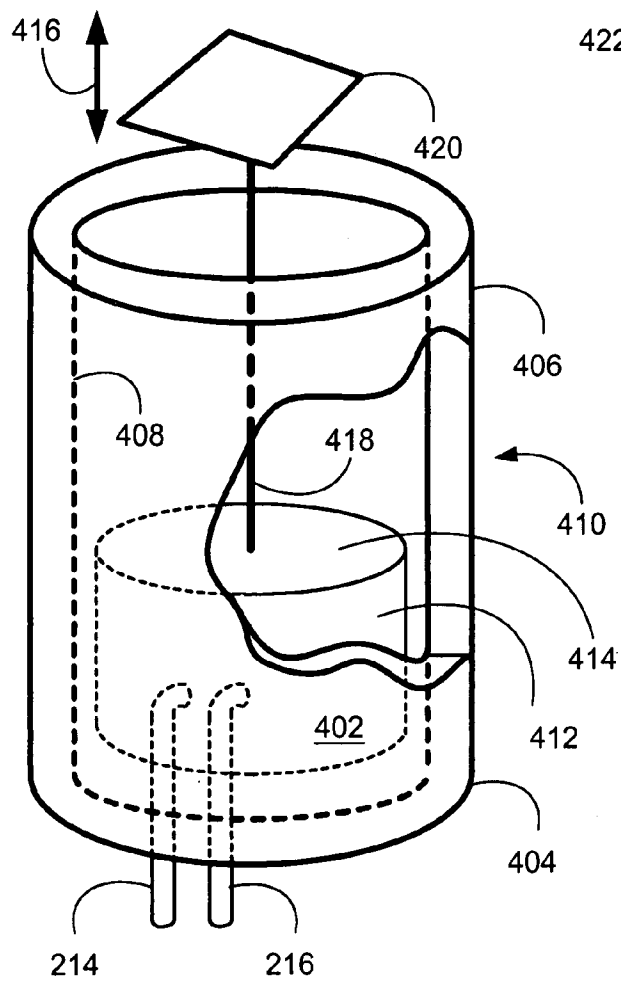


FIG. 4A

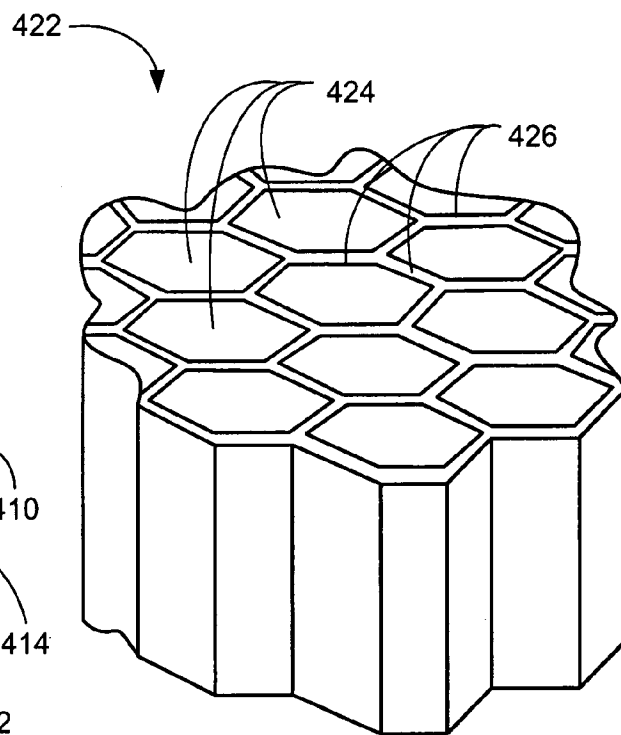


FIG. 4B

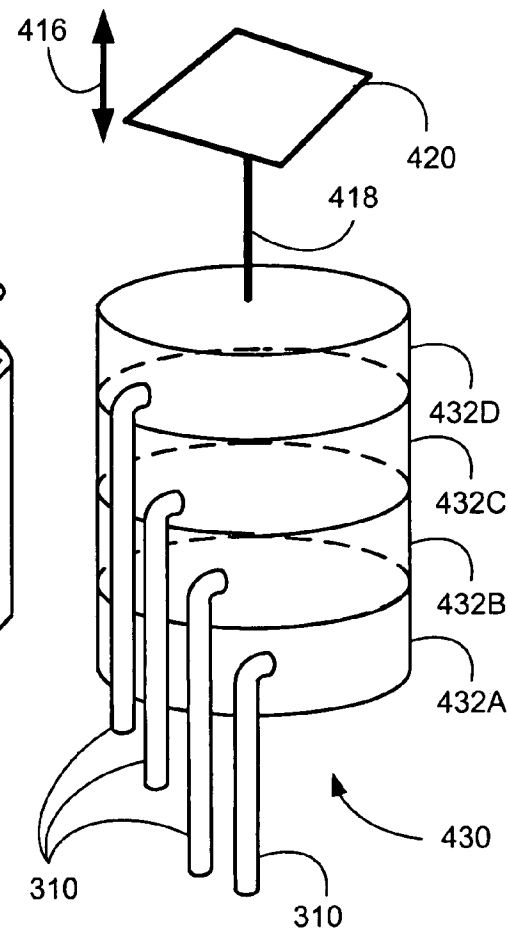


FIG. 4C

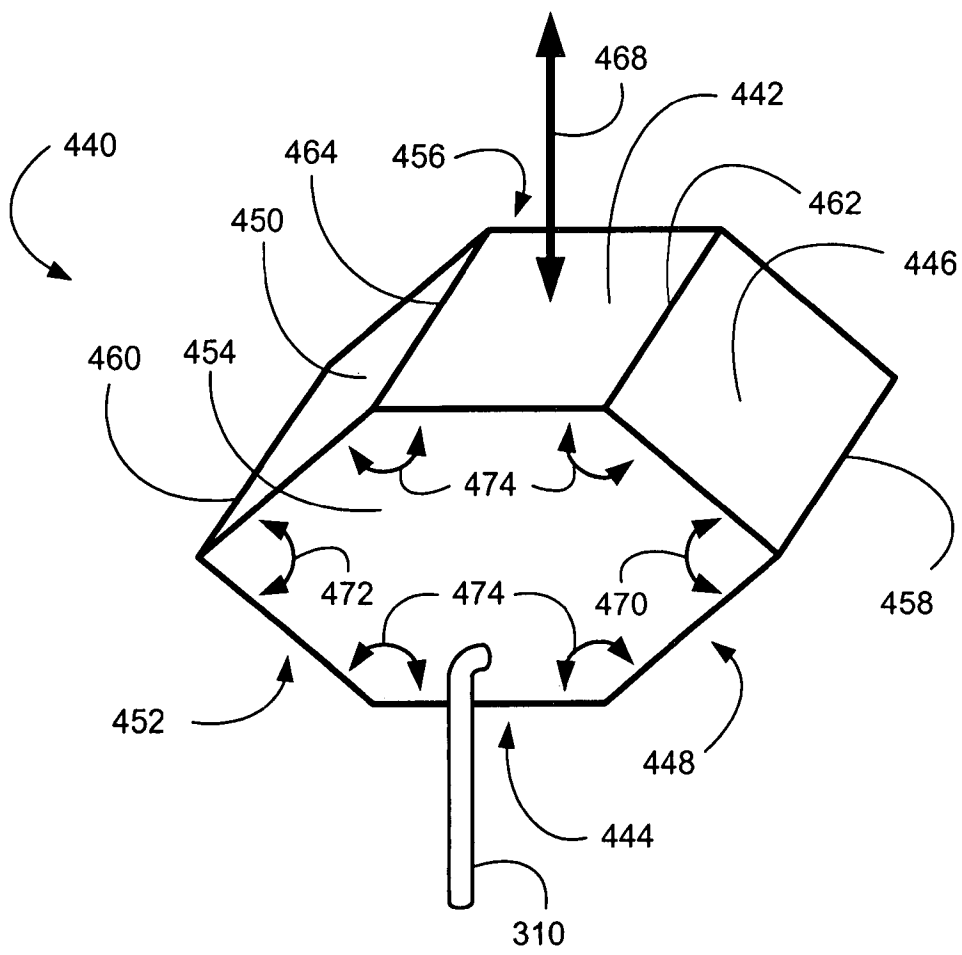


FIG. 4D

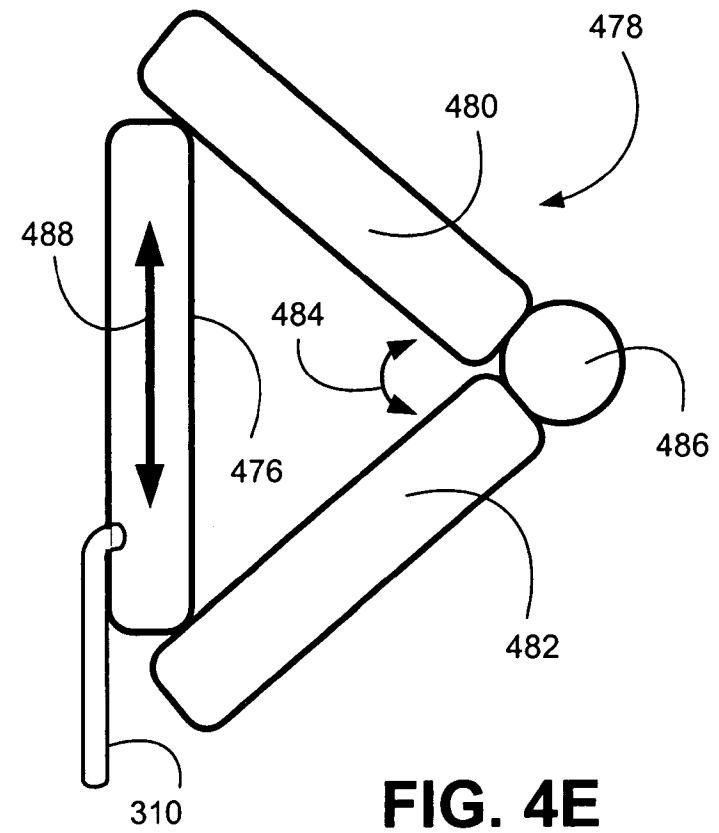


FIG. 4E

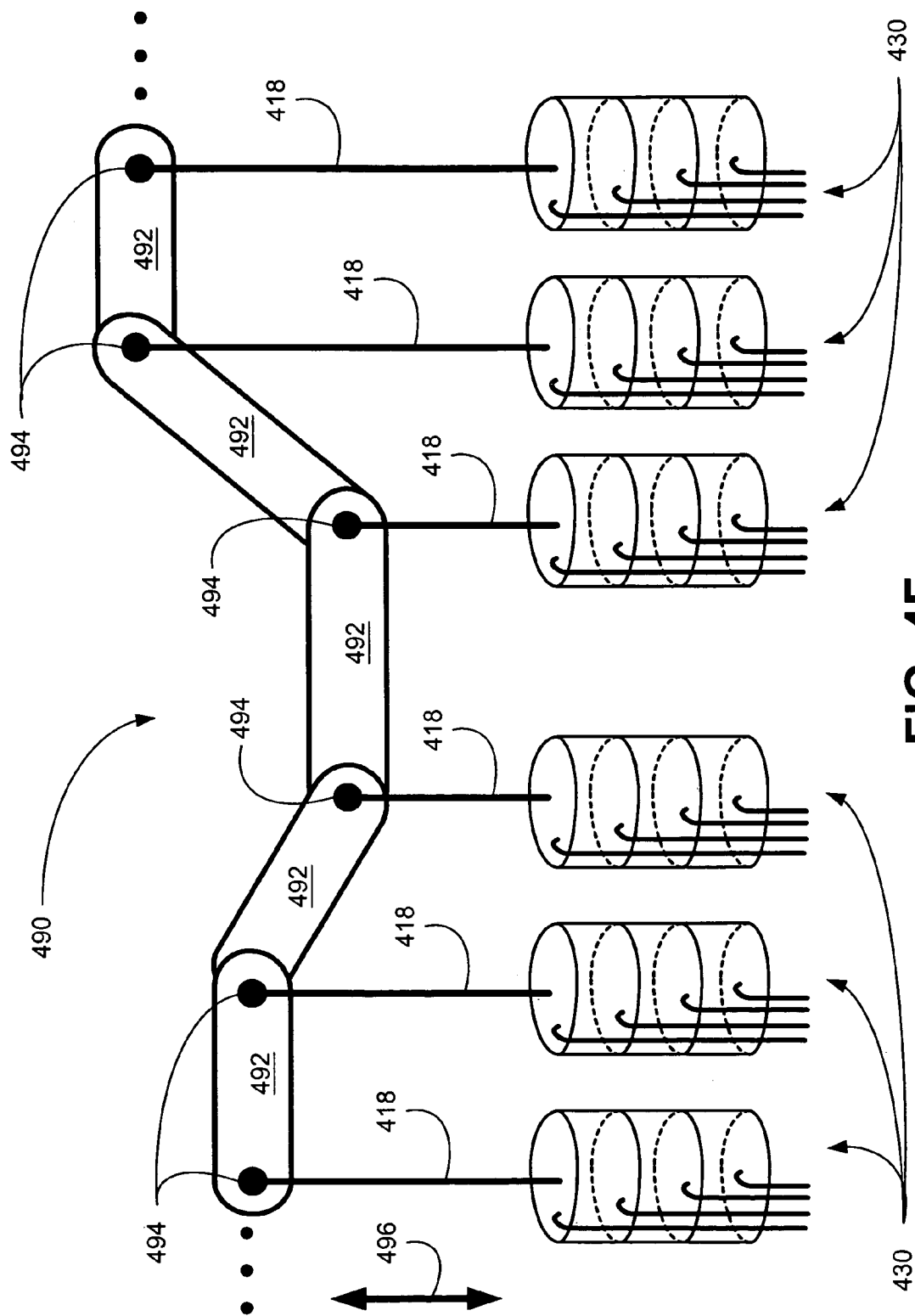
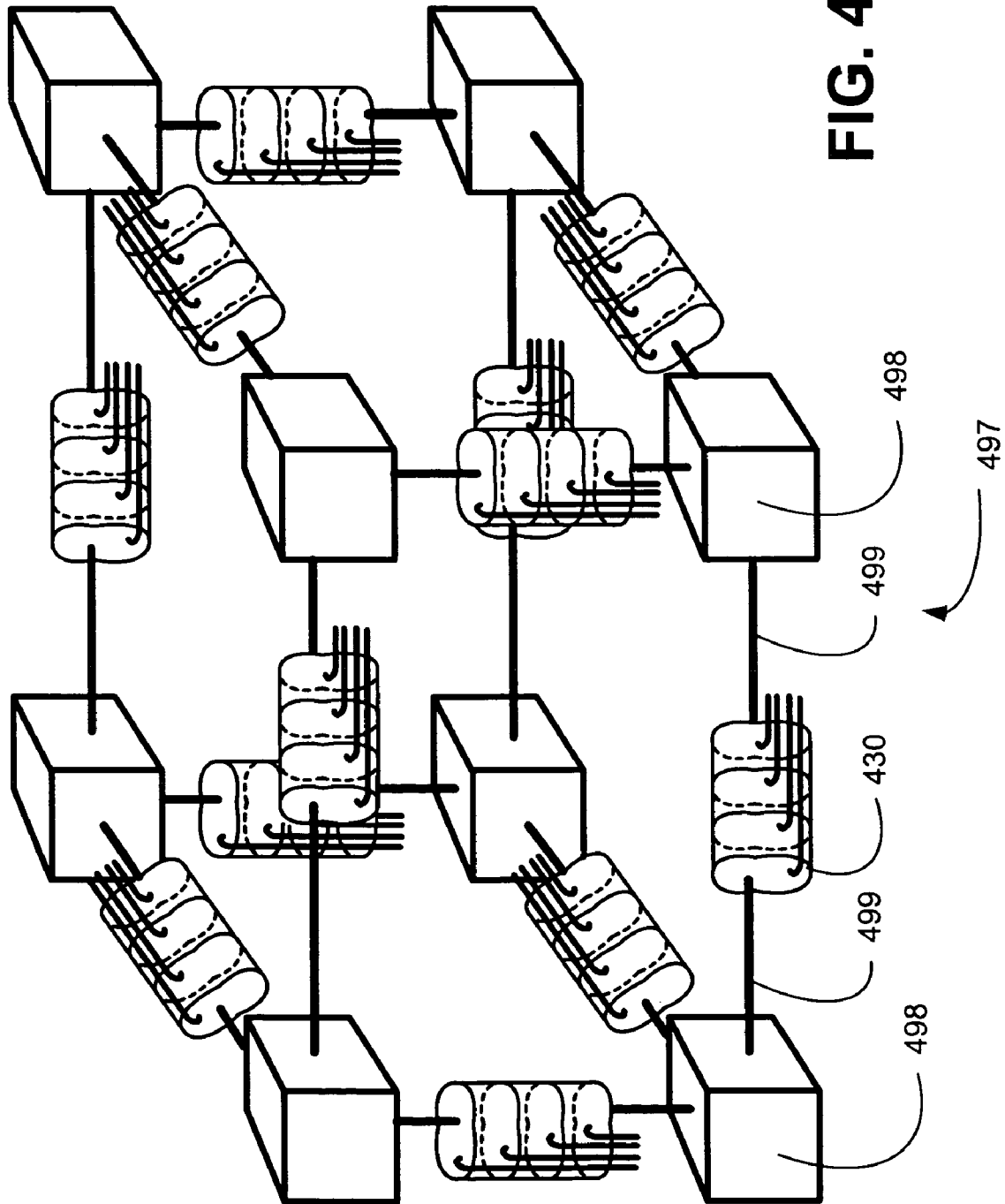
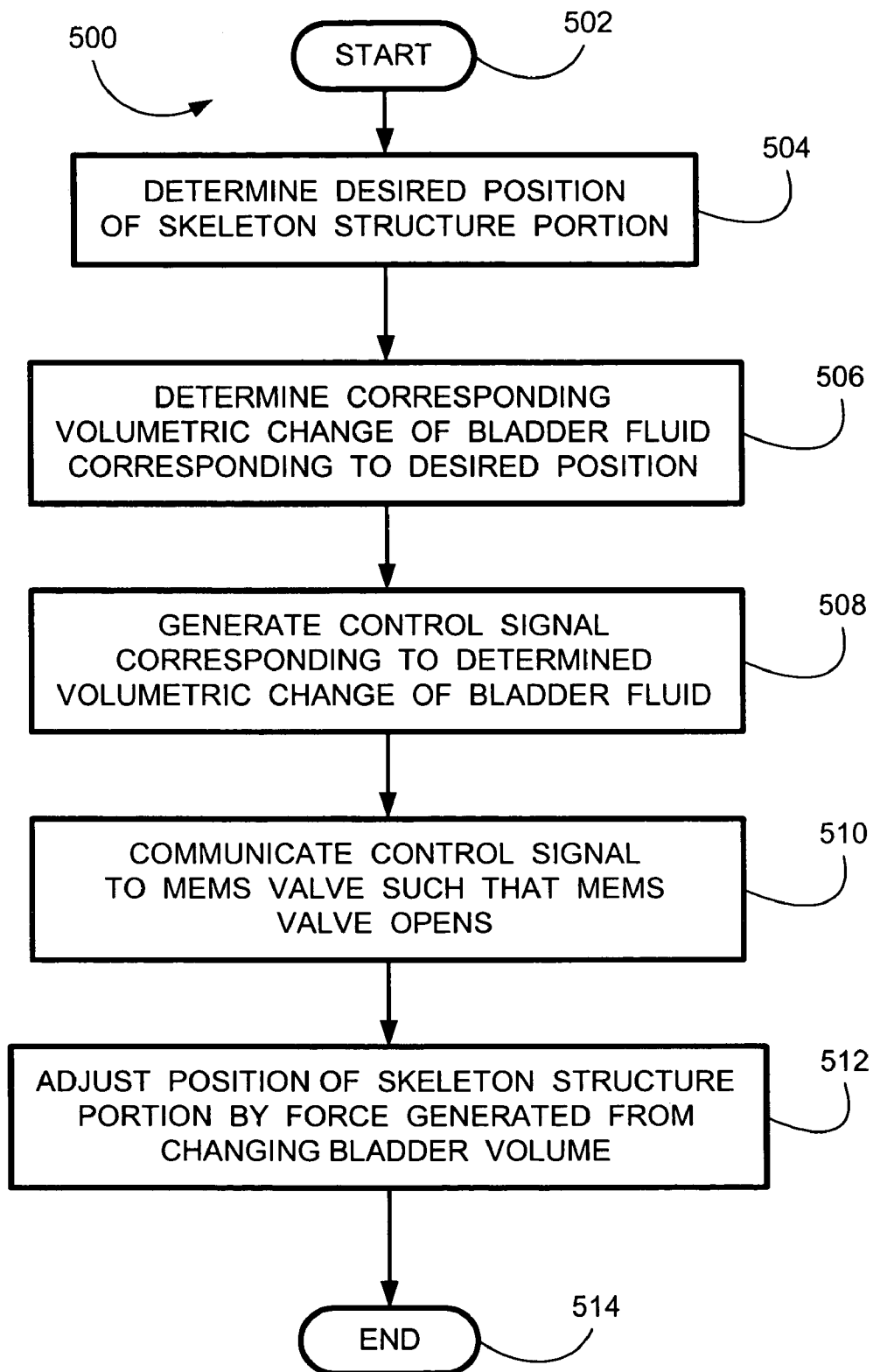
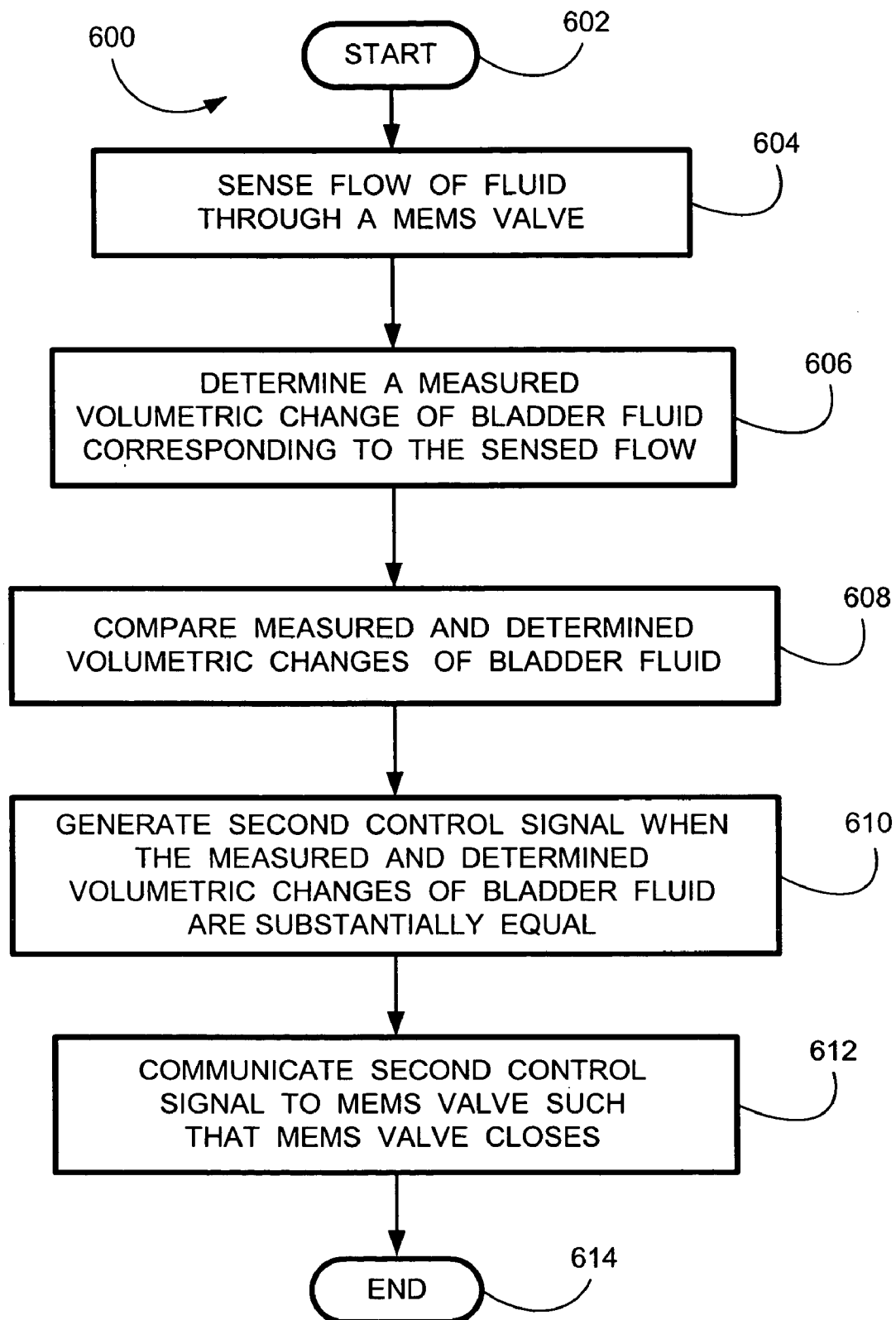
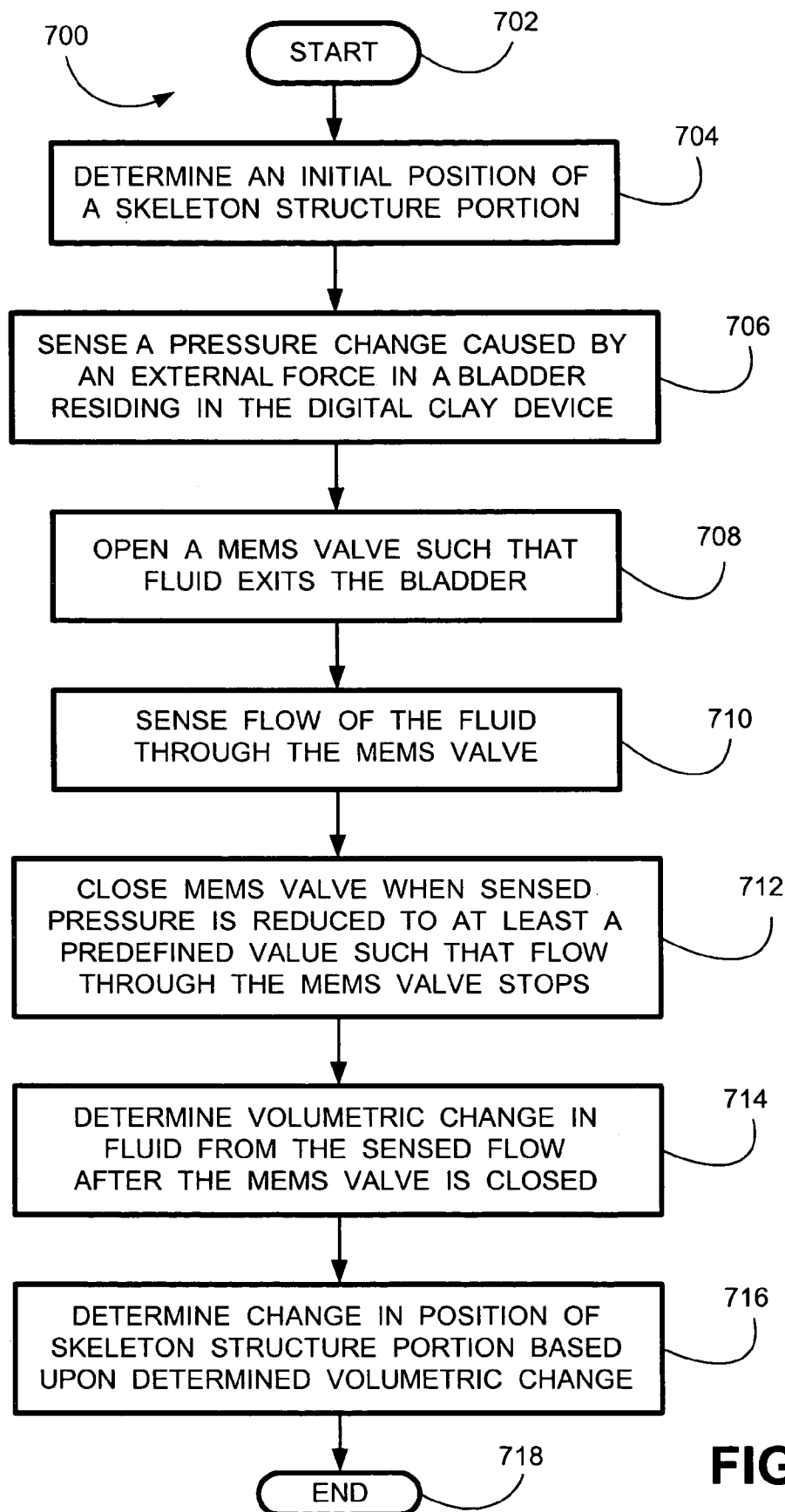


FIG. 4F



**FIG. 5**

**FIG. 6**

**FIG. 7**

1

DIGITAL CLAY APPARATUS AND METHOD**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION**

This application is a divisional of copending U.S. utility application entitled, "DIGITAL CLAY APPARATUS AND METHOD," having Ser. No. 10/164,888, filed Jun. 7, 2002 now U.S. Pat. No. 2,836,736, which is entirely incorporated herein by reference.

This document claims priority to and the benefit of the filing date of co-pending commonly assigned Provisional Application entitled, "DIGITAL CLAY FOR SHAPE INPUT TO AND DISPLAY FROM A COMPUTER," filed Jun. 8, 2001, and accorded Ser. No. 60/296,938. The foregoing pending provisional application is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT

The U.S. Government may have a paid-up license in this invention and the right in limited circumstances to require the patent owner to license to others on reasonable terms as provided for by the terms of Contract No. IIS-0121663, awarded by the National Science Foundation.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention is generally related to haptic interface devices and, more particularly, is related to a system and method for controlling the shape of and/or for receiving information pertaining to a surface and/or a volume of a digital clay device.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Significant prior research has been performed in the area of haptic interfaces. Several haptic-based interaction systems have been developed and used for a variety of applications, including molecular dynamics simulation and steering, manipulation of nano-materials, surgical training, virtual prototyping, and digital sculpting.

Early haptic interface systems utilized a robot arm, both as a six degree-of-freedom input device as well as a force feedback output device, providing the user with a tactile perception of molecular forces and torques. Since then, alternative force-feedback devices with multiple degrees of freedom have been proposed. These approaches provide an intuitive interface for the manipulation of rigid bodies subjected to inertial, contact, or other forces. They are, however, significantly less convenient for sensing and altering the shape of curves and surfaces.

These haptic devices and techniques focus on force feedback, which assists the user in gauging the effort required to be exerted on the surface in order to achieve the desired shape alteration. This approach may also be used to provide information about the stiffness or density of the surface. In addition, such haptic approaches have been applied to the exploration of a field in a volume or even of fluid dynamics. However, these approaches do not provide sufficient tactile feedback regarding the shape of the surface.

Running the tip of a computer cursor over the virtual surface has been suggested as a means for "haptic surface rendering" and have been extended to real-time detection of contacts when manipulating an object with six degrees of freedom. The contact forces may be computed using the concept of "virtual proxy".

2

Such approaches, based on exploration of a surface with the tip or side of a stylus, produce forces that would result from contact, palpation, or stroking actions. These forces may reveal surface anomalies or attract the attention of the designer to small, high-spatial-frequency features that may have been more difficult to detect visually. However, stylus-based approaches are far from exploiting the natural ability of a designer to feel a surface by touching it with a wider area of the hand.

Interfaces involving touch have used gloves, manipulators controlling a stylus held by the hand, and arrays of actuators to depict a surface. They attempt to supply sensations received through our various touch and kinesthetic receptors, often broken into several regimes. Vector macro forces are at the gross end of that scale and are readily displayed by manipulator-like haptic devices. Vibrations are by nature a scalar field and may be distributed widely over the surface of the skin. The amplitude and frequency are noticeable but not the direction. The most difficult to display are small shapes, for which arrays of stimulators are necessary. To achieve both kinesthetic and tactile sensations simultaneously the combination of a haptic manipulator and a tactile array is currently required.

A stylus grasped by a user is one way to explore a haptic environment in a pointwise fashion. If the stylus is attached to a manipulator, interaction forces can be generated which represent interaction of the stylus with a virtual world. Available pointwise haptic displays allow forces and moments to be fed back to the user in two to six degrees of freedom and are well suited to provide the kinesthetic portion of a haptic experience. Haptic mice enable the user to feel the transition of the cursor between different regions of the screen. These haptic manipulators open new possibilities of interfacing, but are comparable to displaying a picture to a viewer one pixel at a time. Haptic manipulators must provide spatial relationships only through temporal sequencing, greatly compromising their efficiency. Sample rates of 1000 Hz are typical with forces controlled at 30 Hz or more for adequate display of features such as a breast tumor.

It is necessary to provide a totally synthetic view of the hand in the environment if haptics are coordinated with vision. Viewing the stylus and its device provides no supporting optical illusion. Another disadvantage of the numerous devices is that the ratio of the smallest to the largest displayable force is difficult to expand. When the hand should be moving unimpeded, it still must exert a force to move the device forward. This problem has been only partially overcome by utilizing a servomechanism based on the position of the hand to avoid contact (i.e., achieve 0 force) except when contact should be displayed.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a system and method for controlling the surface and/or volume of a digital clay device. Briefly described, in architecture, one embodiment is a method comprising the following steps: determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device, determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion, opening a valve so that the fluid flows through the valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell, and adjusting a position of the skeleton structure portion corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure

3

portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

Another embodiment of the invention is a method comprising the following steps: determining an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device, sensing a pressure change in a fluid cell, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to an exterior portion of the digital clay device, opening a valve in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the fluid cell exits the fluid cell, sensing flow of the fluid through the valve, closing the valve when the sensed pressure is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cell, such that flow of the fluid through the valve stops, determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow after the valve is closed, and determining a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion based upon the determined volumetric change.

Another embodiment of the invention comprises a processor system and a plurality of cells, each one of the plurality of cells further comprising at least one fluid cell, the fluid cell configured to hold a fluid, at least one valve, the valve controlled by the processor system, and at least one sensor coupled to the valve, the sensor configured to sense flow of a fluid through the hysteric valve such that a volumetric change in the fluid is determinable by the processor system.

Other systems, methods, features, and advantages of the present invention will be or become apparent to one with skill in the art upon examination of the following drawings and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, features, and advantages be included within this description, be within the scope of the present invention, and be protected by the accompanying claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The components in the drawings are not necessarily to scale relative to each other. Like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the several views.

FIG. 1A is a block diagram of a table top embodiment of a digital clay device according to the present invention.

FIG. 1B is a block diagram of a hand held embodiment of a digital clay device according to the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of an embodiment of a cell.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of an alternative embodiment of a cell.

FIGS. 4A-G illustrate exemplary cell bladders and/or skeleton structure embodiments.

FIGS. 5 and 6 are flowcharts illustrating processes used by an embodiment of the digital clay device to adjust the position of a skeleton structure portion.

FIG. 7 is a flow chart illustrating processes used by an embodiment of the digital clay device to sense the position of a skeleton structure portion.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention provides a system and method for controlling the shape of and/or for receiving information pertaining to a surface, or a volume, or both, of a digital clay device. When operating in one mode, the surface or volume is detected and determined by the present invention, a digital

4

clay device, as described herein, such that a processing system embodiment digitally computes attributes relating to a state of the digital clay device surface and/or volume. When the present invention is operating in a shape and/or volume controlling mode, the processing system embodiment digitally computes desired attributes relating to the surface, or volume, or both, and instructs the digital clay device to deform to the desired attributes. Determination of attributes of the digital clay device surface and/or volume, and/or control of the digital clay device surface and/or volume, may be done statically or dynamically.

In engineering, art, science, medicine and/or communication, shape is a key feature for product design, sculpting, interpreting and/or understanding complex data and the relation between geometrical features. Also, many in our society depend on touch as a substitute for sight and are increasingly disenfranchised in visually dominated electronic communication in school and in everyday life. An effective means to specify (input) and display shapes to/from the computer is provided by the present invention, a digital clay device.

Natural clay is ideally a continuous medium. That is, it ideally has infinite resolution. Although digital clay is actually spatially discrete, with respect to human perception, the micro-sized nature of an individual cell of the digital clay device achieves a virtual infinite resolution with respect to human visual and tactile perception. Thus, digital clay, in one embodiment, has a texture and feel similar to natural clay.

One embodiment of a digital clay device is a distributed input/display device whose surface and/or volume can be shaped by a human user and immediately acquired by a processing system. Or, the surface and/or volume can be shaped by the processing system for the human to examine. Like ordinary clay, digital clay allows a surface or volume to be touched, reshaped with pressure and seen by the user in true three-dimensional form. Unlike ordinary clay, digital clay also provides parameters to the processing system that will represent the shape for the surface and/or volume to the processing system for further analysis, storage, replication, communication and/or modification. Accordingly, digital clay allows the processing system to command its shape and/or volume, providing two-way communication between the processing system and the user.

The digital clay employs a fluid flow from a plurality of micro-electro mechanical systems (MEMS) valves to and from a large array of bladders. In one embodiment, the bladder array allows any variety of shapes (surface or volume) for a parallel-actuated structure covered with an elastomeric external skin. Stereolithography enables the efficient production of the actuated structure. Measurement by sensors coupled to the MEMS valves allows feedback control of the MEMS valves, thereby enabling the processing system to read or command the shape of the digital clay device.

When operating in a mode of controlling a shape and/or volume, the surface and/or volume of the digital clay is extended (or retracted) by the processing system controlled array of MEMS valves that allow pressurized fluid to flow into a massively parallel-actuated structure having bladders and a skeleton, thereby selectively extending (or retracting) selected portions of the surface and/or volume. The MEMS valves, in one embodiment, are located on a backplate and fluid is "piped" into the bladders, as described herein according to the present invention. MEMS valves move microscopically to allow fluid flow into/from a controlled bladder. Bladder fluid changes cause macroscopic displacements in

5

the surface or volume of the digital clay device. With coordination of numerous MEMS valves, the characteristics of the digital clay surface or volume is controlled.

When operating in a mode of detecting and determining a shape and/or volume, a user applies an external force to the surface and/or volume of the digital clay device. Fluid is expelled from the bladders and through an array of MEMS valves. Shaping digital clay is fundamentally a removal and/or relocation process. Embedded sensors coupled to the MEMS valves allow actuator displacement and/or other parameters to be sensed directly, or computed from, sensed values. Accordingly, the sensors detect fluid changes in the bladders. Thus, when a force is applied to the digital clay surface, the MEMS valves are selectively allowed to open to avoid singular conditions internal to the digital clay.

A first digital clay embodiment is a "chunk of clay" that sits on a table top. Another embodiment is held by a user. Applications for the table top embodiment include, but are not limited to, terrain models, conceptual shape models of engineered products (e.g., cars), styling models for architecture and industrial design, and artistic sculpture. For the user held embodiment, applications include, but are not limited to, animation/claymation characters, conceptual design models of hand-held engineered devices, toys, and medical models of organs (shape and "feel" of one or more organs).

FIG. 1A is a block diagram of a table top embodiment of a digital clay device **100** according to the present invention. The digital clay device includes a backplate **102**, a plurality of cells **104** configured into a predetermined three-dimensional cell array **106**, a digital clay surface **108**, and a processing system **110**. For convenience, only a portion of the backplate **102**, digital clay array **106** and digital clay surface **108** is illustrated in FIG. 1A. The shape, size, elasticity and texture of the digital clay surface **108** can be selected to suit a particular embodiment.

In various embodiments, each actuator comprises a discrete fluidically-inflatable cell that is connected to two common pressurized reservoirs (within a base) through a two-way miniature valve integrated with a pressure sensor. Included in such embodiments is a backplate bearing passive or active valves that allow either filling or draining of the cell into their respective reservoirs, and also bearing the pressure sensors that measure the pressure drop across each valve.

In an exemplary embodiment, the backplate consists of a rigid base bearing a dense array of individual modular elements, wherein each module possesses means for a fluidic connection to the actuator cells in the volume of the clay. At a minimum, each module comprises three components: a pressure sensor, a passive or active hysteretic valve (see below), and control logic/electrical interconnect. Hysteretic valves are valves that do not conduct fluid in either direction until a threshold pressure drop, significantly greater than zero, is exceeded. Such hysteretic valves are required in the digital clay application to ensure that the clay, once deformed into a specific shape either by the user or by computer commands, remains in that position until a further command is received. A hysteretic valve can be turned 'on' in one of two ways: either the threshold pressure in either direction is exceeded (passive operation), or the hysteresis pressure is lowered to zero by some external, active control means (active operation). Passive operation would be primarily used when the user is 'sculpting' a shape out of the digital clay. Active operation would primarily be used when, under computer control, the digital clay is being programmed to assume a specific shape.

6

Each module of the backplate **102** will be dedicated to and in fluidic communication with a fluidic cell **104**, which will provide actuation power and pressure sensing to the scaffolding in the volume of the clay. Since each cell **104** will contain a microfluidic line, formed by lamination (see below), between its volume and a modular element on the underlying substrate, the substrate will contain a two-dimensional projection of the three-dimensional volume of actuating cells **104**. Each module (valve and pressure sensor) will therefore allow control and measurement of the pressure in each fluidic cell **104**. MEMS technology may be in this application for two reasons. First, a dense array of physically small sensors and actuators are required (the devices must be physically small due to the three-to-two dimensional projection that occurs on the surface of the substrate). Second, all of the electrical wiring as well as attachment pads for multiplexing and interface silicon chips can be lithographically formed on the substrate simultaneously with the sensors and actuators. It should be noted that no MEMS structures are required to undergo large displacements or generate large, macroscopic forces in the operation of the digital clay. All of the 'macroscopic' force required originates in the fluidic reservoir **224** (FIG. 2). The MEMS structures act merely as sensors of, and modulators of, this force. This approach allows the realization of three-dimensional control of the volume of digital clay with forces exceeding that of small, distributed actuators, and eliminates the need for electrical wiring through the volume of the digital clay.

Processing system **110** is illustrated for convenience as having at least a processor unit **112**, a monitor **114** and a keyboard **116**. Processing system **110** controls the execution of a program, described herein, employed by the present invention. It is understood that any suitable processor system **110** may be employed in various embodiments of a digital clay device. Processing system **110** may be a specially designed and/or fabricated processing system, or a commercially available processing system. Non-limiting examples of commercially available processor systems include, but are not limited to, an 80x86 or Pentium series microprocessor from Intel Corporation, U.S.A., a PowerPC microprocessor from IBM., a Sparc microprocessor from Sun Microsystems, Inc., a PA-RISC series microprocessor from Hewlett-Packard Company, or a 68xxx series microprocessor from Motorola Corporation.

Processing system **110** is coupled to a plurality of MEMS valves and sensors of each cell **104**, as described in greater detail below, via connection **118**. Connection **118**, for convenience, is illustrated as a single connection. However, it is understood that connection **118** includes internally a plurality of connections, thereby providing connectivity between processor system **110** and other discrete devices such as the MEMS valves, sensors, or a suitable interface bus residing in the backplate **102**.

In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 1A, movement of the digital clay surface **108** is along one axis of movement, namely up or down, based upon the orientation of the digital clay surface **108** as illustrated in FIG. 1A. It is understood that the digital clay surface **108** may be oriented in any desirable manner.

The cell array **106** includes a plurality of columns of cells **120**, **122**, **124** through **126**. Cells **120**, **122**, **124** through **126** each include a bladder configured to hold a fluid and a skeleton configured to direct forces associated with changes in volume of the bladder, as described in greater detail below. The bottom of cell **120** is supported by a portion of the backplate **102**. Cells **122**, **124** through **126** are stacked on

7

top of cell 120. Cell 126, the top cell of a column of cells (comprised of a plurality of cells) is in contact with a skeleton structure portion 128, described in greater detail below. The skeleton structure portion 128 is in contact with the digital clay surface 108.

When fluid is added to one or more of the plurality cells 120, 122, 124 through 126, the skeleton structure portion 128 of the digital clay surface 108 is moved upwards in the direction illustrated by arrow 130. When fluid is removed from one or more of the cells 120, 122, 124 through 126, the skeleton structure portion 128 in contact with the digital clay surface 108 is moved downwards in the direction illustrated by arrow 130. Accordingly, it is understood that the position of the skeleton structure portion 128 is controlled by adding or removing fluid in the cells 120, 122, 124 through 126. Furthermore, it is understood that the position of the skeleton structure portion 128 is determined by determining the amount of fluid in the cells 120, 122, 124 through 126. Adding, removing and determining the amount of fluid in the cells 120, 122, 124 through 126 according to the present invention is described in greater detail below.

It is understood that the cell array 106 is comprised of a plurality of columns of cells. The top cell of each column of cells is in contact with a portion of the digital clay surface 108. Thus, the position of any individual portion of the digital clay surface 108 is determinable and/or controllable since the amount of fluid in each one of the cells in a cell column is determinable and/or controllable. Accordingly, it is further understood that the shape, position and contours of the entire digital clay surface 108 is determinable and/or controllable since the individual portions of the digital clay surface 108 are determinable and/or controllable by its respective cell column.

FIG. 1B is a block diagram of a hand held embodiment of a digital clay device 140 according to the present invention. Processor system 110 controls the digital clay device 140 as described herein. Digital clay device 140 includes a matrix of cells 142, each cell having bladders and a skeleton structure as described herein. The matrix of cells 142 extends out to the digital clay surface 144. The shape, size, elasticity and texture of the digital clay surface 144 can be selected to suit a particular embodiment. For convenience, a portion of the digital clay surface 144 is illustrated as being cut away to show an interior region 146 of the digital clay device 140.

For each portion of the digital clay surface 144, a cell portion 148 of a cell 150 is in contact with the portion of the digital clay surface 144. Thus, position of the portion of the digital clay surface 144 is determinable and/or controllable according to the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of an embodiment of a cell 200. Cell 200 includes a bladder 202, a skeleton structure portion 204, MEMS valves 206 and 208, sensors 210 and 212, pipes 214 and 216, and a portion 218 of backplate 102. MEMS valves 206 and 208, and sensors 210 and 212, are fabricated/ mounted on or into the portion 218 of backplate 102. Sensor 210, coupled to MEMS valve 206 via connection 220, is configured to sense information corresponding to the amount of fluid passing through MEMS valve 206. Similarly, sensor 212, coupled to MEMS valve 208 via connection 222, is configured to sense information corresponding to the amount of fluid passing through MEMS valve 208.

MEMS valve 206 is coupled to high pressure reservoir 224 via a channel 226 and a pipe 228. Channel 226 is fabricated into backplate 102 and is coupled to MEMS valve 206. Channel 226, pipe 228, MEMS valve 206 and pipe 214 communicate fluid from the high pressure reservoir 224 to

8

the bladder 202 when MEMS valve 206 is open. Accordingly, it is understood that pressure of bladder 202 is less than the pressure of the high pressure reservoir 224. In an alternative embodiment, high pressure reservoir 224 is directly coupled to channel 226 such that pipe 228 is omitted.

Similarly, MEMS valve 208 is coupled to low pressure reservoir 230 via a channel 232 and a pipe 234. Channel 232 is fabricated into backplate 102 and is coupled to MEMS valve 208. Channel 232, pipe 234, MEMS valve 208 and pipe 216 communicate fluid from the bladder 202 to the low pressure reservoir 230 when MEMS valve 208 is open. Accordingly, it is understood that pressure of bladder 202 is greater than the pressure of the low pressure reservoir 230. In an alternative embodiment, low pressure reservoir 230 is directly coupled to channel 232 such that pipe 234 is omitted.

For convenience, an optional bus 238 is illustrated as providing connectivity between connection 118 and connections 238, 240, 242 and 244. In one embodiment, a second processor system 246 is coupled to bus 238, via connection 248, to facilitate management of communication of control signals and/or information between processor system 110 and MEMS valves 206 and 208, and sensors 210 and 212. The bus 238 and/or the second processing unit 246 may be fabricated into the backplate 102 or reside as an external component, depending upon the embodiment. In another embodiment, the second processor 246 is omitted such that MEMS valves 206 and 208, and sensors 210 and 212, are in direct communication with the processor system 110. Similarly, in another embodiment, bus 238 is omitted such that MEMS valves 206 and 208, and sensors 210 and 212, are in direct communication with the processor system 110 (and/or the second processor system 246 if included).

Accordingly, when the bladder 202 is to be expanded (increase volume), a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 206, thereby causing MEMS valve 206 to open. Sensor 210 senses the volume of fluid passing through MEMS valve 206 and communicates the information to processor system 110. When a desired amount of fluid is transported into bladder 202, a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 206, thereby causing MEMS valve 208 to close. As described above, expansion of bladder 202 when fluid is added causes an associated force to be exerted such that the moveable portions 250 of the bladder 202 causes a portion of the digital clay surface to move in a controlled direction.

Similarly, when the bladder 202 is retracted (decrease volume), a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 208, thereby causing MEMS valve 208 to open. Sensor 212 senses the volume of fluid passing through MEMS valve 208 and communicates the information to processor system 110. When a desired amount of fluid is transported from bladder 202, a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 208, thereby causing MEMS valve 208 to close. As described above, retraction of bladder 202 when fluid is removed causes an associated force to be exerted such that moveable portion 250 of the bladder 202 causes a portion of the digital clay surface to move in a controlled direction.

Furthermore, an external force may be exerted on the moveable portion 250 of bladder 202, via a skeleton structure portion 204, thereby increasing pressure in bladder 202. For example, a user may squeeze the digital clay surface, thereby causing an external pressure on the moveable por-

tion 250 of bladder 202. Sensor 210, sensor 212 or another suitable sensor (not shown) detects the change in pressure of bladder 202. The information from the sensor is communicated to processor system 110 such that the processor system understands that an external force is being exerted on the digital clay surface, and that it is desirable to remove (or add) fluid from the bladder 202 such that the digital clay deforms in accordance with the applied external force. Accordingly, processor system 110 communicates a suitable signal to MEMS valve 208 such that the MEMS valve 208 opens, thereby allowing fluid to exit from the bladder 202. Or, processor system 110 communicates a suitable signal to MEMS valve 206 such that the MEMS valve 206 opens, thereby allowing fluid to enter into the bladder 202. When the sensor 210, sensor 212 or other suitable sensor detects a return of bladder pressure to a predetermined value and/or pressure change, and such corresponding information is communicated to processor system 110, a suitable control signal is communicated such that the opened MEMS valve 208 or 206 is closed.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of an alternative embodiment of a cell 300. Cell 300 includes a bladder 302, a skeleton 304, a two-way MEMS valve 306, a sensor 308, a pipe 310, and a portion 312 of backplate 102. MEMS valve 306 and sensor 308 are fabricated/mounted on or into the portion 312 of backplate 102. Sensor 308, coupled to MEMS valve 306 via connection 314, is configured to sense information corresponding to the amount of fluid passing through MEMS valve 306.

MEMS valve 306 is coupled to high pressure reservoir 224 via a channel 226 and a pipe 228. Channel 226 is fabricated into backplate 102 and is coupled to MEMS valve 306. Channel 226, pipe 228, MEMS valve 306 and pipe 310 communicate fluid from the high pressure reservoir 224 into the bladder 302 when MEMS valve 306 is open in a first position. Accordingly, it is understood that pressure of bladder 302 is less than the pressure of the high pressure reservoir 224. In an alternative embodiment, high pressure reservoir 224 is directly coupled to channel 226 such that pipe 228 is omitted.

Similarly, MEMS valve 306 is coupled to low pressure reservoir 230 via a channel 232 and a pipe 234. Channel 232 is fabricated into backplate 102 and is coupled to MEMS valve 306. Channel 232, pipe 234, MEMS valve 306 and pipe 310 communicate fluid from the bladder 302 to the low pressure reservoir 230 when MEMS valve 306 is open in a second position. Accordingly, it is understood that pressure of bladder 302 is greater than the pressure of the low pressure reservoir 230. In an alternative embodiment, low pressure reservoir 230 is directly coupled to channel 232 such that pipe 234 is omitted.

For convenience, an optional bus 238 is illustrated as providing connectivity between connection 118 and connections 316 and 318. In another embodiment, a second processor system 246 is coupled to bus 238, via connection 248, to facilitate management of communication of control signals and/or information between processor system 110 and MEMS valve 306 and sensor 308. The bus 238 and/or the second processing unit 246 may be fabricated into the backplate 102 or reside as an external component, depending upon the embodiment. In another embodiment, the second processor 246 is omitted such that MEMS valve 306 and sensor 308 are in direct communication with the processor system 110. Similarly, in another embodiment, bus 238 is omitted such that MEMS valve 306 and sensor 308 are in direct communication with the processor system 110 (and/or the second processor system 246 if included).

Accordingly, when the bladder 302 is expanded (increase volume), a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 306, thereby causing MEMS valve 306 to open in the first position. Sensor 308 senses the volume of fluid passing through MEMS valve 306 and communicates the information to processor system 110. When a desired amount of fluid is transported into bladder 302, a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 306, thereby causing MEMS valve 306 to close. As described above, expansion of bladder 302 when fluid is added causes an associated force to be exerted such that the moveable portions 320 of the bladder 302 causes a portion of the digital clay surface to move in a controlled direction.

Similarly, when the bladder 302 is retracted (decrease volume), a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 306, thereby causing MEMS valve 306 to open in a second position. Sensor 308 senses the volume of fluid passing through MEMS valve 306 and communicates the information to processor system 110. When a desired amount of fluid is transported from bladder 302, a suitable control signal is communicated by processor system 110 to MEMS valve 306, thereby causing MEMS valve 306 to close. As described above, retraction of bladder 302 when fluid is removed causes an associated force to be exerted such that moveable portion 320 of the bladder 302 causes a portion of the digital clay surface to move in a controlled direction.

Furthermore, an external force may be exerted on the moveable portion 320 of bladder 302, thereby increasing pressure in bladder 302. For example, a user may squeeze the digital clay surface, thereby causing an external pressure on the moveable portion 320 of bladder 302. Sensor 308 or another suitable sensor (not shown) detects the change in pressure of bladder 302. The information from the sensor 308 is communicated to processor system 110 such that the processor system understands that an external force is being exerted on the digital clay surface, and that it is desirable to remove (or add) fluid from the bladder 302 such that the digital clay deforms in accordance with the applied external force. Fluid would be added to bladder 302 when bladder pressure decreases, and removed from bladder 302 when bladder pressure increases. Accordingly, processor system 110 communicates a suitable signal to MEMS valve 306 such that the MEMS valve 306 opens, thereby allowing fluid to exit from the bladder 302. Or, processor system 110 communicates a suitable signal to MEMS valve 306 such that the MEMS valve 306 opens, thereby allowing fluid to enter into the bladder 302. When the sensor 308 or other suitable sensor detects a return of bladder pressure to a predetermined value and/or pressure change, and such corresponding information is communicated to processor system 110, a suitable control signal is communicated such that the opened MEMS valve 306 is closed.

In alternative embodiments, the second processor system 246 (FIGS. 2 and 3) is configured to receive general instructions relating to the control of individual bladders and/or bladder units from processor system 110. The second processor system 246 then determines and communicates suitable control signals to individual MEMS valves to add or remove fluids from individual bladders.

Furthermore, in another embodiment, the second processor system 246 is configured to receive information from individual sensors and to determine changes in fluid volumes in the corresponding individual bladders. Corresponding changes in position of the skeleton structure portions, as

11

described in greater detail below, is determined and communicated to the processor system 110.

For convenience, sensors 210, 212 and 308 (FIGS. 2 and 3) are illustrated and described above as a generalized, non-specific type of sensor. Any suitable sensor may be used that provides information such that the changes in bladder fluid volume are determinable. In one embodiment, a sensor is configured to directly measure the fluid volume flow through a MEMS valve. In another embodiment, a sensor is configured to directly measure fluid flow rate through a MEMS valve. With this sensor, the change in fluid volume is determined by the integral of the sensed fluid flow rates during the time that the MEMS valve is open. In yet another embodiment, a sensor is configured to directly measure pressure differences across a MEMS valve. With this sensor, the change in fluid volume is determined by the integral of the sensed pressure difference to compute a flow rate during the time that the MEMS valve is open. Other embodiments employ other suitable sensors.

Skeleton structure portions 204 (FIG. 2) and 304 (FIG. 3) are comprised of at least one rigid skeleton portion. The rigid portion of the skeleton structure portions 204 and 304 restrain movement of the bladders 202 (FIG. 2) and 302 (FIG. 3) when the portions of the bladders 202 and 302 are in contact with the rigid portions of the skeleton structure portions 204 and 304. Thus, the bladders 202 and 302 move within the skeleton in the unrestrained direction(s) as fluid is removed from or added to the bladders 202 and 302. That is, skeleton structure portions 204 and/or 304 constrain movement of the bladders 202 and 302 to a desired direction(s) when the volume of the bladders 202 and 302 is changed.

In the digital clay device, the skeleton structure portions are selectively coupled together. Coupling may be either rigidly or flexibly. That is, flexible joints or hinges may be used to couple the skeleton structure portions. Accordingly, it is understood that a skeleton having a plurality of skeleton structure portions is used to provide a skeleton that moves in a predictable manner. And, the position of the individual skeleton portions define the shape of the skeleton. Movement of the skeleton is definable by changes in the position of skeleton members.

Various control signals and information signals communicated from and/or to processor system 110 are processed by the digital clay logic 252 residing in the processor system 110. If a second processor system 246 is employed to coordinate communication of signals, and/or generate control signals, as described herein, a portion of the digital clay logic 252 may reside in the second processor system 246.

Another embodiment of a MEMS valve is configured to open when a pressure differential across the MEMS valve exceeds a predetermined pressure difference. The MEMS valve, in one embodiment, is controlled mechanically by the pressure difference. In another embodiment, the MEMS valve is controlled electronically based upon sensed pressure differences. Accordingly, if an external force applied to a bladder increases bladder pressure, and the resultant pressure difference exceeds the predefined pressure difference, the MEMS valve opens to allow fluid to flow from the bladder to the low pressure reservoir 230. Similarly, if an external force applied to a bladder decreases bladder pressure, and the resultant pressure difference exceeds the predefined pressure difference, the MEMS valve opens to allow fluid to flow from the high pressure reservoir 224 into the bladder.

Furthermore, rate of change information in the bladder pressures, generated by external forces, may be determined. This determined rate of pressure change allows determina-

12

tion of the rate of change of the skeleton portions, and accordingly, allows determination of the rate of change of the digital clay device surface.

FIG. 4A illustrates an exemplary cell bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404 embodiment. For convenience, bladder 402 is illustrated as a cylindrical shape. Two pipes 214 and 216 (see also FIG. 2) are illustrated. As described above, pipes 214 and 216 provide for the transfer of fluid into and out of the cell 402, as described above for cell 200 (FIG. 2). For convenience, skeleton structure portion 404 is illustrated as being shaped as a tube. Skeleton structure portion 404 includes an outer wall 406 and an inner wall 408. The diameter of the inner wall 408 is approximately the same diameter of the bladder 402. For illustrative purposes, a portion of the skeleton structure portion 404 is illustrated as having a cut-away section 410. (Accordingly, non visible portions of the bladder 402 and the skeleton structure portion 404 are denoted with dashed lines.)

Thus, as fluid is added to bladder 402, the portion 412 of bladder 402 in contact with the inner wall 408 is kinematically constrained from moving in an outward direction (normal to the inner wall 408). Thus, as the bladder expands, the top surface 414 of bladder 402 moves in an upward direction (assuming that the bottom of bladder 402 is constrained), as indicated by the arrow 416. Similarly, as the bladder deflates, the top surface 414 of bladder 402 moves in a downward direction (assuming that the bottom of bladder 402 is constrained), as indicated by the arrow 416.

Top surface 414 is illustrated as being in contact with a member 418. Member 418 is illustrated as being in contact with a skeleton structure portion 420. Thus, movement of the top surface 414 in the upward direction (when fluid is added into bladder 402) causes the skeleton structure portion 420 to move upward by a corresponding amount. Similarly, movement of the top surface 414 in the downward direction (when fluid is removed from bladder 402) causes the skeleton structure portion 420 to move downward by a corresponding amount.

The simplified bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404, and their associated components, as described above and illustrated in FIG. 4A, demonstrate selected aspects of the present invention. That is, movement of a bladder within a separate skeleton can control movement of a remote surface. Furthermore, for simplicity, a member 418 was used to illustrate one possible way to couple the skeleton structure portion 420 to the bladder 402. Alternative embodiments may use multiple members coupled to a plurality of digital clay surface portions. Or, the top surface 414 may be in direct contact with the skeleton structure portion 420 (assuming that the skeleton structure portion 404 is configured appropriately). Also, the member 418 is illustrated as representing a dowel, rod, bar of the like. It is understood that the member may be constructed of any suitable material and may have any suitable configuration without departing substantially from the present invention. Thus, the member 418 may be a composite material, a rigid material, or even a semi-rigid material. In one embodiment, member 418 and skeleton structure portion 420 are fabricated as a single unit, or fabricated together as a portion of a complex skeleton structure.

Another aspect of the simplified bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404 is that for convenience, the simplified bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404 were illustrated as having a cylindrical shape. It is understood that the simplified bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404 may have any suitable shape. For example, the simplified bladder 402 and skeleton structure portion 404 may have a

13

plurality of flat sides, such as a triangle, square, hexagon or other suitable multiple sided shape to facilitate the fabrication of a cell matrix having a plurality of adjacent cells (bladders **402**, skeleton structure portions **404** and associated components). Furthermore, portions of the simplified bladder **402** and/or skeleton structure portion **404** may be curvilinear.

Also, it is understood that a unitary body skeleton **422** configured to kinematically restrain movement of a plurality of bladders may be constructed. FIG. 4B illustrates one such embodiment, wherein the skeleton **422** is configured to restrain many bladders (not shown) residing in cavities **424**. Thus, individual walls **426** of the skeleton **422** restrain multiple bladders.

With the simplified bladder **402** and skeleton structure portion **404**, and their associated components, as described above and illustrated in FIG. 4A, range of movement of the skeleton structure portion **420** afforded by the movement of the top surface **414** is ultimately limited by the maximum volume of fluid that can be added to or removed from bladder **402**. When bladder **402** and skeleton structure portion **404** are fabricated using micro technologies described herein, the range of movement provided by a single bladder **402** is not perceptible by a user of the digital clay device.

FIG. 4C illustrates an embodiment of a bladder unit **430** employing a plurality of stacked bladders **432A-D**. It is understood that the stacked bladders **432A-D** are illustrated for convenience as being shaped in a cylindrical form, similar to bladder **402** (FIG. 4A). Accordingly, bladders **432A-D** are configured to fit together within the skeleton structure portion **404** (FIG. 4A) to form bladder unit **430**. Thus, the total range of movement that may be imparted onto the skeleton structure portion **420** equals the sum of the individual range of motion for each one of the bladders **432A-D**. It is understood that any desirable number of bladders may be used in a bladder unit. Furthermore, it is understood that bladders **432A-D** may be shaped to fit within any type of skeleton. For example, but not limited to, the bladders **432A-D** could be shaped so as to reside in one of the cavities **424** of skeleton **422** (FIG. 4B).

Also, the bladders **432A-D** are illustrated as employing a single pipe **310** configured to transfer fluid into or out of its respective bladder, as described above in the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 3. Thus, it is understood that for any of the bladder embodiments, skeleton embodiments and/or combined bladder-skeleton embodiments described herein, that fluids may be transferred into or removed from using the embodiments described in FIGS. 2 and/or 3.

Skeleton structure portions **204** (FIG. 2) and **304** (FIG. 3), and bladders **202** and **302**, respectively, are illustrated for convenience as being separate components. FIG. 4D is a perspective view of an embodiment wherein the bladder and the skeleton are formed as a single bladder-skeleton unit **440**. Bladder-skeleton unit **440** is illustrated for convenience as employing a single pipe **310** configured to transfer fluid into or out of its respective bladder, as described above in the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 3. Another bladder-skeleton unit **440** embodiment transfers fluids into or from using the bladder-skeleton unit **440** as described in FIG. 2.

Bladder-skeleton unit **440** has eight sides; a top side **442**, a bottom side **444** (hidden from view), an upper right-hand side **446**, a lower right-hand side **448** (hidden from view), an upper left-hand side **450**, a lower right-hand side **452** (hidden from view), a front side **454** and a back side **456** (hidden from view). The front side **454** and the back side **456** are flexible, but are restrained to moving (stretching) in

14

directions normal to the other sides **442**, **444**, **446**, **448**, **450** and **452**. (That is, the front side **454** and the back side **456** do not bulge substantially inward or outward when fluid is added to or removed from the bladder-skeleton unit **440**.)

In this embodiment, sides **442**, **444**, **446**, **448**, **450** and **452** are rigid, or relatively rigid. Adjacent sides are coupled together as shown with a hinging device **460**. Thus, a hinge **458** couples the upper right-hand side **446** to the lower right-hand side **448**. Similarly, a hinge **460** couples the upper left-hand side **450** and the lower left-hand side **452**, a hinge **462** couples the top side **442** with the upper right-hand side **446**, and a hinge **464** couples the top side **442** with the upper left-hand side **450**. It is understood that two similar hinges couple the bottom side **444** to the lower right-hand side **448** and to the lower left-hand side **452**. Accordingly, as fluid is added to or removed from the bladder-skeleton unit **440**, the top side **442** and/or the bottom side **444** move in an upwards or downwards direction, as indicated by the direction arrow **468**. Depending upon the particular digital clay device **100** in which the bladder-skeleton unit **440** is used, the top side **442** or the bottom side **444** may be fixed to a rigid structure, thereby limiting movement to the opposing side.

For example, as fluid is added into the bladder-skeleton unit **440**, the top side **442** is forced to move in an upwards direction (particularly if the bottom side is in a fixed position). Thus, the angle **470** (formed by the joining of the upper right-hand side **446** to the lower right-hand side **448**) and the angle **472** (formed by the joining of the upper left-hand side **450** to the lower left-hand side **452**) increase. Concurrently, the angles **474** (formed by the joining of the other sides as shown) decrease.

Similarly, as fluid is removed from the bladder-skeleton unit **440**, the top side **442** is forced to move in a downwards direction (particularly if the bottom side is in a fixed position). Thus, the angle **470** and the angle **472** decrease. Concurrently, the angles **474** increase.

During fabrication, as described in greater detail below, a plurality of bladder-skeleton units **440** may be fabricated together. In such an embodiment, resulting in a honey comb-like skeleton matrix, a large cell matrix is formed. Thus, such an embodiment employing a plurality of bladder-skeleton units **440** can be fabricated to form any desired shape, form or size. Also, bladder-skeleton units may be formed having any suitable number of sides and/or curvilinear surfaces.

FIG. 4E illustrates an embodiment employing a bladder unit **476** and a skeleton unit **478**. Bladder unit has at least one bladder (as indicated by the pipe **310**). A bladder unit **476** may have a plurality of bladders and be constructed in accordance with any of the embodiments described herein.

Skeleton unit **478** has a first member **480** and a second member **482**, forming an angle **484** therebetween. A hinge **486** allows the two members **480** and **482** to move, thereby changing the angle **484**. It is understood that the bladder unit **476** controls the position of the members **480** and **482**. Thus, when the bladder unit **480** is extended when fluid is added into the bladder, as shown by the direction arrow **488**, angle **484** increases. Similarly, when fluid is removed from the bladder unit **476** such that the bladder retracts, angle **484** decreases.

Skeleton unit **478** is a simplified, non-limiting example of a component that provides for angular control of two members **480** and **482**. Members **480** and **482** may have any suitable form, such as, but not limited to, bars, rods, plates, curvilinear surfaces, or even object surfaces. Furthermore, it

15

is understood that the skeleton unit 478 may be a portion of a larger integrated skeleton structure used in a digital clay device.

FIG. 4F illustrates an embodiment employing a plurality of bladder units 430 (see also FIG. 4C) to control a linear skeleton structure 490. Linear skeleton structure 490 is comprised of a plurality of members 492. Each member 492 is coupled together as shown at point 494. Point 494 is a flexible connector, such as a pin or flexible portion of a continuous structure, as described in greater detail herein.

As described above, optional members 418 couple the top of the bladder unit 430 to a point 494. As fluid is added to the bladders of bladder unit 430, an upward force is exerted onto its respective point 494 such that the position of the respective coupled members 492 is moved upward, as indicated by the direction arrow 496. Similarly, as fluid is removed from the bladders of bladder unit 430, a downward force is exerted onto its respective point 494 such that the position of the respective coupled members 492 is moved downward, as indicated by the direction arrow 496. Also, if an external downward force is applied to any member 492, the linear skeleton structure 490 and positions of the individual members 492 are moved such that a corresponding force is generated on the respective bladder unit 430. The force on the bladder unit 430 causes fluid to be expelled, as described above, such that the new positions of the members 492 are determinable.

Therefore, it is understood that the shape of the linear skeleton structure 490, and the position of any individual member 492, is controllable by the bladder units 430 according to the present invention. Furthermore, deformations in the shape of the linear skeleton structure 490, or changes in the position of any individual member 492, caused by an external force is determinable by the present invention.

When a plurality of linear skeleton structures 490 are aligned side-by-side to form an array, a surface is defined. The surface may be part of a table top embodiment similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 1A, or may be part of the surface of a volume of digital clay. Furthermore, the top of the plurality of linear skeleton structures 490 may be covered with a flexible digital clay surface 108 (FIG. 1A).

Additionally, as described above, it is understood that each one of the bladder units 430 is associated with its own skeleton (not shown) such that when fluid is added or removed from individual bladders, forces and movement are generated along the direction shown by the direction arrow 496. Furthermore, the skeletons associated with each of the bladder units 430 and the linear skeleton structure 490 may be formed into a single unitary skeleton structure when the digital clay device is fabricated.

FIG. 4G illustrates an embodiment employing a plurality of bladder units 430 (see also FIG. 4C) to control a skeleton structure portion 497. Skeleton structure portion 497 is comprised of a plurality of points 498 and optional members 499. Points 498 are comprised of a flexible connector providing for multiple degrees of freedom of movement, such as a pin or flexible portion of a continuous structure, as described in greater detail herein.

For convenience, the skeleton structure portion 497 is illustrated as a rectangular structure having eight points 498. However, it is understood that the skeleton structure may have any number of points 498, thereby creating a skeleton structure portion 497 of any desirable size or shape. Also, for convenience, points 498 are illustrated as cubic structures. The points 498 may be formed in any suitable shape or configuration. Furthermore, the bladder units are illustrated for convenience as being coupled to the cube shaped points

16

498 in a direction normal to the faces of the cube shaped points 498. It is understood that bladder units 430 may be connected across diagonals of the skeleton structure portion 497, or even between non-adjacent points 498 (when a larger matrix of points 498 comprise the skeleton structure portion 497). Accordingly, the selection of the points 498 with a bladder unit 430 is a preference made at the time of design and/or fabrication of the skeleton structure portion 497.

In one embodiment, the outside surface of skeleton structure portion 497, or portions thereof, is covered with a digital clay surface 108 (FIG. 1A). As noted above, the elasticity and texture of the digital clay surface 108 can be selected to suit a particular embodiment.

As illustrated in FIG. 4G, a point 498 is coupled to one or more bladder units 430. Thus, it is understood that the position of any point is controllable and/or determinable by embodiments of the present invention. As described above, optional members 499 couple the ends of the bladder units 430 to a point 498. As fluid is added to the bladders of bladder unit 430, a force is exerted onto its respective point 498 such that the position of the respective point 498 is moved. Similarly, as fluid is removed from the bladders of bladder unit 430, a force is exerted onto its respective point 498 such that the position of the point 498 is moved. Furthermore, if an external force is applied to any point 498, the skeleton structure portion 497 and positions of the points 498 are moved such that a corresponding force is generated on the respective bladder units 430. The force on the bladder units 430 causes fluid to be expelled, as described above, such that the new positions of the points 498 are determinable.

The various embodiments of the skeleton structure(s) described herein provide kinematic constraints to the motion of the bladders and/or bladder units in the digital clay device. Measurement of the volume of fluid in each bladder, along with a solution of the kinematics of the skeleton structure, allows the unambiguous determination of the position of the outermost surface of the digital clay device, thereby leading externally to a predictable digital clay surface shape.

The skeleton structure, in one embodiment, is formed from a scaffolding structure fabricated using stereolithography (SLA). The skeleton structure is fabricated to support active and passive motion in a very large number of degrees of freedom. Thus, the skeleton structure is a 3-D deformable structure. A SLA scaffolding structure employs a process of building the 3-D skeleton structure by selectively curing photopolymer with an ultraviolet (UV) laser. Accordingly, a skeleton structure fabricated using SLA technologies includes the capability to build portions of the skeleton using any desired arbitrary shape. Intricate interior structures wherein bladders, pipes and skeleton portions may be fabricated as a unit. Also, a skeleton structure fabricated using SLA technologies implements compliant (flexible) joints (hinges) by varying the thickness of interior connections in the skeleton structure. Furthermore, a skeleton structure fabricated using SLA technologies provides for the insertion of sensors during the skeleton structure fabrication process in another embodiment.

As described herein, the skeleton structure may be configured using any suitable geometry. Simplified, non-limiting illustrative geometries have been described above in FIGS. 4A-G, and elsewhere herein. Very complex geometries may be used to form the skeleton structure (or portions thereof). One embodiment employs a variable geometry truss (VGT). A VGT is a truss structure that actively deforms by changing the lengths of selected links. Accordingly, a

17

skeleton structure employing VGT portions provides for folding structure portions that are easily deformed. For example, but not limited to, a VGT comprised of stacked octahedral truss structures can be completely folded away by actuating the length of selected lateral members by a small amount. Such a VGT structure employed in a digital clay device is advantageous since a small bladder movement results in a very large change of digital clay volume, thus allowing the digital clay device to undergo very large deformations.

FIGS. 5 and 6 are flow charts 500 and 600, respectively, illustrating processes used by an embodiment of the digital clay device to adjust the position of a skeleton structure portion. The flow charts 500 and 600 show the architecture, functionality, and operation of a possible implementation of the software for implementing the digital clay logic 252 (FIGS. 2 and 3). In this regard, each block may represent a module, segment, or portion of code, which comprises one or more executable instructions for implementing the specified logical function(s). It should also be noted that in some alternative implementations, the functions noted in the blocks may occur out of the order noted in FIGS. 5 and/or 6, and/or may include additional functions, without departing significantly from the functionality of the present invention. For example, two blocks shown in succession in FIGS. 5 and/or 6 may in fact be executed substantially concurrently, the blocks may sometimes be executed in the reverse order, or some of the blocks may not be executed in all instances, depending upon the functionality involved, as will be further clarified hereinbelow. All such modifications and variations are intended to be included herein within the scope of this disclosure for the digital clay device and to be protected by the accompanying claims.

The flow chart 500 of FIG. 5 starts at block 502. At block 504 a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device is determined. At block 506 a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a bladder, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion, is determined. At block 508 a control signal corresponding to the determined volumetric change is generated. At block 510 the control signal is communicated to a MEMS valve such that the MEMS valve opens so that the fluid flows through the MEMS valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the bladder. At block 512 the position of the skeleton structure portion is adjusted corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the bladder on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the bladder changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the bladder. The process ends at block 514.

The flow chart 600 of FIG. 6 starts at block 602. At block 604 flow of the fluid through the MEMS valve is sensed. At block 606 a measured volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow is determined. At block 608 the measured volumetric change and the determined volumetric change are compared. At block 610 a second control signal is generated when the measured volumetric change substantially equals the determined volumetric change. At block 612 the second control signal is communicated to the MEMS valve such that the MEMS valve closes so that the fluid flow through the MEMS valve stops. The process ends at block 614.

The flow charts 500 and 600 describe processes for controlling flow into or out of one bladder. It is understood that the processes are equally applicable to a selected

18

plurality of bladders. When flow of fluid into and out of a plurality of selected bladders are controlled in a coordinated manner by the present invention as described above, the volume and shape of the digital clay device is controllable.

FIG. 7 is a flow chart 700 illustrating processes used by an embodiment of the digital clay device to sense the position of a skeleton structure portion. The flow chart 700 shows the architecture, functionality, and operation of a possible implementation of the software for implementing the digital clay logic 252 (FIGS. 2 and 3). In this regard, each block may represent a module, segment, or portion of code, which comprises one or more executable instructions for implementing the specified logical function(s). It should also be noted that in some alternative implementations, the functions noted in the blocks may occur out of the order noted in FIG. 7 and/or may include additional functions without departing significantly from the functionality of the present invention. For example, two blocks shown in succession in FIG. 7 may in fact be executed substantially concurrently, the blocks may sometimes be executed in the reverse order, or some of the blocks may not be executed in all instances, depending upon the functionality involved, as will be further clarified hereinbelow. All such modifications and variations are intended to be included herein within the scope of this disclosure for the digital clay device and to be protected by the accompanying claims.

The flow chart 700 of FIG. 7 starts at block 702. At block 704 an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device is determined. The initial position can be determined from a predefined position that the skeleton structure portion has been preset to prior to application of an external force. Or, the initial position can be determined from a prior state.

At block 706 a pressure change on a bladder, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to the exterior portion of the digital clay device is sensed. At block 708 a MEMS valve is opened in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the bladder exits the bladder. At block 710 flow of the fluid through the MEMS valve is sensed. At block 712 the MEMS valve is closed when the sensed pressure is reduced to at least a predefined value such that flow of the fluid through the MEMS valve stops. The reduced pressure results from the exit of fluid from the bladder. At block 714 a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow after the MEMS valve is closed is determined. At block 716 a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion is determined based upon the determining a volumetric change. The process ends at block 718.

The flow chart 700 describe a process for determining the change in position of a portion of a skeleton structure based upon flow out of one bladder. It is understood that the process is equally applicable to determining the change in position of a plurality of skeleton structure portions by sensing flow out of a plurality of bladders. When flow of fluid out of a plurality of bladders are sensed in a coordinated manner by the present invention as described above, the shape of the digital clay is determinable.

It should be emphasized that the above-described embodiments of the present invention are merely possible examples of implementations, merely set forth for a clear understanding of the principles of the invention. Many variations and modifications may be made to the above-described embodiment(s) of the invention without departing substantially from the spirit and principles of the invention. All such modifications and variations are intended to be included

19

herein within the scope of this disclosure and the present invention and protected by the following claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method for controlling shape of a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;
determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion;

opening a valve so that the fluid flows through the valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

adjusting a position of the skeleton structure portion corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening a hysteric valve.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening an active valve.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening a passive valve.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

sensing flow of the fluid through the valve;

determining a measured volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow;

comparing the measured volumetric change to the determined volumetric change; and

closing the valve so that the fluid flow through the valve stops when the measured volumetric change substantially equals the determined volumetric change.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein sensing flow further comprises sensing a flow rate of the fluid through the valve.

7. The method of claim 5, wherein sensing flow further comprises sensing a pressure difference across the valve, and wherein determining the measured volumetric change further comprises calculating a flow rate of the fluid through the valve based upon the sensed pressure difference.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

determining a plurality of volumetric changes of fluid residing in a plurality of fluid cells such that the sum of the determined plurality of volumetric changes corresponds to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion;

opening a corresponding plurality of valves so that fluid flows through the valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the corresponding fluid cells;

sensing flow of fluid through each one of the plurality of valves;

determining a plurality of measured volumetric changes in the fluid from the sensed flows;

comparing each one of the plurality of measured volumetric changes to a corresponding one of the determined volumetric changes; and

closing the plurality of valves when the corresponding one of the measured volumetric changes substantially equals the corresponding determined volumetric change.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein the opening further comprises opening the valve so that the fluid flows through

20

the valve thereby causing fluid to flow into the fluid cell in response to a pressure differential in a reservoir.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein the opening further comprises opening the valve so that the fluid flows through the valve thereby causing fluid to flow out of the fluid cell into a reservoir.

11. A method for controlling shape of a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion;

changing volume of the fluid in the fluid cell thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

adjusting a position of the skeleton structure portion corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

12. A method for sensing shape of a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

sensing a pressure change in a fluid cell, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to an exterior portion of the digital clay device;

opening a valve in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the fluid cell exits the fluid cell;

sensing flow of the fluid through the valve;

closing the valve when the sensed pressure change is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cell, such that flow of the fluid through the valve stops;

determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow after the valve is closed; and

determining a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion based upon the determined volumetric change.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening a hysteric valve.

14. The method of claim 12, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening an active valve.

15. The method of claim 12, wherein opening the valve further comprises opening a passive valve.

16. The method of claim 12, wherein sensing pressure change further comprises sensing a rate of the pressure change.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein determining the change in the position of the skeleton structure portion is based upon the sensed rate of the pressure change.

18. The method of claim 12, further comprising:

determining a plurality of initial positions for each one of a plurality of skeleton structure portions residing in the digital clay device;

sensing a pressure change in a plurality of fluid cells, the pressure change corresponding to the external force applied to the exterior portion of the digital clay device;

21

opening a plurality of valves in corresponding ones of the plurality of fluid cells in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the fluid cells exits the fluid cells;

sensing flow of the fluid through each one of the corresponding valves;

closing each one of the corresponding valves when the sensed pressure change in each one of the corresponding fluid cells is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cells;

determining volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow in each one of the corresponding valves after the valves are closed; and

determining change in the position of the skeleton structure portions based upon the determined volumetric changes.

19. A method for sensing shape of a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

sensing a pressure change in a fluid cell, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to an exterior portion of the digital clay device;

changing a volume of fluid residing in the fluid cell;

ending the volume change of the fluid when the sensed pressure change corresponds to at least a predefined value, the pressure change resulting from the volume change of the fluid in the fluid cell;

determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow after ending the fluid removal; and

determining a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion based upon the determined volumetric change.

20. A system which controls a surface of a digital clay device, comprising:

a processor system;

a plurality of modules, each one of the plurality of modules further comprising:

at least one fluid cell, the fluid cell configured to hold a fluid;

at least one valve, the valve controlled by the processor system; and

at least one sensor coupled to the valve, the sensor configured to sense flow of the fluid through the valve such that a volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell is determinable by the processor system; and

a covering having a plurality of surface portions, the covering being flexible and forming the surface of the digital clay device, each one of the surface portions coupled to selected ones of the plurality of modules such that a position of each one of the plurality of surface portions is controllable and determinable, the position of each one of the plurality of surface portions corresponding to an amount of the fluid residing in the corresponding fluid cell.

21. The system of claim 20, wherein the valve further comprises a hysteric valve.

22. The system of claim 20, wherein the valve further comprises an active valve.

23. The system of claim 20, wherein the valve further comprises a passive valve.

24. The system of claim 20, wherein each one of the modules further comprises a skeleton structure portion configured to kinematically constrain movement of the fluid cell in a predetermined direction.

22

25. The system of claim 20, wherein each one of the modules further comprises a backplate portion where the valve and the sensor reside.

26. The system of claim 20, wherein at least one of the modules comprises a single valve and a single sensor, the single valve configured to open in a first position such that the fluid flows into the fluid cell, and further configured to open in a second position such that the fluid flows out of the fluid cell.

27. The system of claim 20, further comprising a high pressure reservoir, the high pressure reservoir having a pressure greater than a fluid cell pressure of the fluid cell such that when a corresponding valve coupled between the fluid cell and the high pressure reservoir is opened, the fluid flows from the high pressure reservoir into the fluid cell.

28. The system of claim 20, further comprising a low pressure reservoir, the low pressure reservoir having a pressure less than a fluid cell pressure of the fluid cell such that when a corresponding valve coupled between the fluid cell and the low pressure reservoir is opened, fluid flows from the fluid cell into the low pressure reservoir.

29. A system for sensing shape of a digital clay device, comprising:

means for determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

means for determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion;

means for changing the volume of fluid in the fluid cell thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

means for adjusting a position of the skeleton structure portion corresponding to the desired position of the skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

30. The system of claim 29, further comprising:

means for sensing flow of the fluid;

means for determining a measured volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow; and

means for comparing the measured volumetric change to the determined volumetric change.

31. The system of claim 30, wherein the means for sensing flow further comprises means for sensing a pressure difference across a valve, and wherein the means for determining the measured volumetric change further comprises means for calculating a flow rate of the fluid through the valve based upon the sensed pressure difference.

32. A computer readable medium having a program for sensing shape of a digital clay device, the program comprising logic configured to perform:

determining a desired position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the skeleton structure portion;

communicating a first control signal to a valve such that the valve opens so that the fluid flows through the valve thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

communicating a second control signal to the valve such that the valve closes when position of the skeleton structure portion adjusts the desired position of the

23

skeleton structure portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell on the skeleton structure portion when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

33. A system which senses shape of a digital clay device, comprising:

means for determining an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

means for sensing a pressure change in a fluid cell, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to an exterior portion of the digital clay device;

means for adjusting volume of a fluid in the fluid cell in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the fluid cell exits the fluid cell;

means for sensing flow of the fluid from the fluid cell;

means for ending flow of the fluid through the fluid cell when the sensed pressure change is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cell;

means for determining a volumetric change in the fluid after ending the flow of fluid; and

means for determining a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion based upon the determined volumetric change of the fluid.

34. The system of claim 33, further comprising means for returning the skeleton structure portion to a predetermined position such that the initial position of the skeleton structure portion is based upon the predetermined position.

35. The system of claim 33, further comprising means for retrieving information corresponding to a previous position of the skeleton structure portion such that the initial position of the skeleton structure portion is based upon the previous position.

36. A computer readable medium having a program for sensing shape of a digital clay device, the program comprising logic configured to perform:

determining an initial position of a skeleton structure portion residing in the digital clay device;

sensing a pressure change in a plurality of fluid cells, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to an exterior portion of the digital clay device;

opening at least one valve in response to the sensed pressure change such that fluid residing in the fluid cell exits the fluid cell;

sensing flow of the fluid through the valve;

closing the valve when the sensed pressure change is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cell, such that flow of the fluid through the valve stops;

determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow after the valve is closed; and

determining a change in the position of the skeleton structure portion based upon the determined volumetric change.

37. A method for controlling shape of a surface using a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining a desired position of at least one surface portion;

determining a volumetric change of a fluid residing in a fluid cell, the determined volumetric change corresponding to the determined desired position of the surface portion;

changing volume of the fluid in the fluid cell, thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

24

adjusting a position of the surface portion corresponding to the desired position of the surface portion, the position adjustment caused by a force generated by the fluid cell when the volume of the fluid cell changes in response to the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the fluid cell.

38. The method of claim 37, further comprising:

sensing flow of the fluid;

determining a measured volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow;

comparing the measured volumetric change to the determined volumetric change; and

ending the flow of the fluid.

39. The method of claim 38, wherein sensing flow further comprises sensing a pressure difference across a valve, and wherein determining the measured volumetric change further comprises calculating a flow rate of the fluid through the valve based upon the sensed pressure difference.

40. The method of claim 37, further comprising:

determining a plurality of volumetric changes of fluid residing in a plurality of fluid cells such that the sum of the determined plurality of volumetric changes corresponds to the determined desired position of the surface portion;

changing volume of the fluid in the plurality of fluid cells thereby causing the determined volumetric change of the fluid residing in the corresponding fluid cells;

sensing flow of fluid of each one of the plurality of fluid cells;

determining a plurality of measured volumetric changes in the fluid in the plurality of fluid cells from the sensed flows;

comparing each one of the plurality of measured volumetric changes to a corresponding one of the determined volumetric changes; and

ending the flow of the fluid when the corresponding ones of the measured volumetric changes substantially equals the corresponding determined volumetric change.

41. The method of claim 37, further comprising:

opening a valve to a first position so that the fluid flows into the fluid cell when the determined volumetric change increases an amount of fluid residing in the fluid cell; and

opening the valve to a second position so that the fluid flows out of the fluid cell when the determined volumetric change decreases the amount of fluid residing in the fluid cell.

42. A method for sensing shape of a surface using a digital clay device, the method comprising:

determining an initial position of a surface portion;

sensing a pressure change in a fluid cell, the pressure change corresponding to an external force applied to the surface portion;

changing volume of the fluid in the fluid cell;

sensing flow of the fluid removed from the fluid cell;

ending the fluid flow when the sensed pressure change is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cell;

determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flow; and

determining a change in the position of the surface portion based upon the determined volumetric change.

43. The method of claim 42, further comprising returning the surface portion to a predetermined position such that

25

determining the initial position of the surface portion is based upon the predetermined position.

44. The method of claim **42**, further comprising retrieving information corresponding to a previous position of the surface portion such that determining the initial position of the surface portion is based upon the previous position. 5

45. The method of claim **42**, further comprising:
determining a plurality of initial positions for each one of a plurality of surface portions;

sensing a pressure change in a plurality of fluid cells, the pressure change corresponding to the external force applied to the surface portions; 10

changing volume of the fluid in the fluid cells;

26

sensing flow of the fluid through each one of the fluid cells;

ending fluid flow when the sensed pressure change in each one of the corresponding fluid cells is reduced to at least a predefined value, the reduced pressure change resulting from the exit of fluid from the fluid cells;

determining a volumetric change in the fluid from the sensed flows; and

determining a change in the position of the surface portions based upon the determined volumetric changes.

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